



Stranger Things 3: Countdown by 2Strangers

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Summary: Next fall, the kids are starting high school and El is struggling to adjust to new rules, bullies, English class and a rocky relationship with Mike. Being normal isn't easy. Meanwhile, the Mind Flayer is developing a new plan of attack. He isn't through with Will, and halfway across the country there's a boy trapped in a lab, desperate to meet his sister by any means necessary.

1. Ready for School?

It was early when Eleven's alarm clock went off. Too early. After an entire summer of sleeping in however late she wanted, the fourteen-year-old could already tell that this was going to be adjustment. But today...today was *the* day. The first day of high school. Months and months of preparation with Nancy Wheeler had all led up to *this* day. She'd endured so many frustrating and difficult sessions and had more than one breakdown as she continued to doubt herself, but this was the day it would all be put to the test. Everyone kept telling her that Nancy couldn't possibly have done a better job preparing her, but she still didn't feel ready. The idea of going to school had lost much of its appeal once she'd realized it was more than a daily social event, and the work was hard. El had come a long way, but she still had a long way to go.

It wasn't all bad, though. Even though she wasn't sure she'd like it, going to school was a normal thing to do. This was what normal teenagers who weren't government experiments did with their lives, and El was more than ready to become one of them. After today, no more hiding. For real this time- they'd even moved out of the cabin in the woods back to Hopper's little house by the water. After two years of having to hide, El was finally getting her freedom. Even if school was the worst thing ever, it was worth it for that alone.

The girl rolled out of bed and ran her hand through her wavy shoulder-length hair, rising to her feet and approaching her closet, where she fished out her favorite pair of jeans, a purple top with small flowers on it and a pair of socks. After getting dressed she brushed her teeth and ran a comb through her wavy hair, sweeping it up into a half ponytail to keep it out of her face before putting on her white Converse sneakers. They'd just been washed and almost looked like new again. Then, she grabbed her new blue backpack containing a stationary set Mrs. Byers had given her for her birthday and went into the kitchen where she knew Steve Harrington would be waiting.

Steve had been coming around quite a bit since he graduated, and he had grown on El quite a bit. He was training to be an officer and had become Hopper's go-to babysitter when Nancy was busy like this

morning. He was always nice to her, and it was El's personal opinion that he would make a great police officer.

"Morning, champ," Steve said cheerfully, grinning at the younger teenager. El slid her backpack off her shoulder, letting it fall on one of the four chairs at the table. She offered Steve a little smile in return.

"Morning."

"Ready for high school?" Steve turned around and placed a mouth-watering stack of Eggos in front of Eleven, along with a bottle of maple syrup. Her eyes widened in amazement- Hopper always made her have "real food" before Eggos.

"Think so," she replied, pulling the chair back and sitting down. The truth was that she was terrified, but she was the girl who'd faced the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer. How could she admit to being afraid of a high school filled with other teenagers just like her?

Except, other teenagers weren't just like her. No matter how many times everyone told her she was going to be normal, it wasn't true. No matter how normal she managed to appear on the outside, she would always be different. And that wasn't a bad thing; El knew it was her differences that had given her the ability to save her friends, but it was also her differences that caused the reason they needed to be saved.

"Think so?" Steve produced his own plate of Eggos and sat down across from her, leaning over to catch a glimpse at her downcast eyes. "What's that supposed to mean? You know, I promised the Chief you'd be okay." El glanced up to meet his eyes, looking slightly annoyed.

"I'm okay," she insisted.

Just then, the doorbell rang and Steve leapt to his feet, opening the door on a smiling Dustin with his backpack slung over his shoulder.

"Steve!" the boy exclaimed, not having expected to see his friend. "I didn't know you'd be here, what's up?"

"Just gettin' the boss's daughter off to school, here," Steve replied, equally as happy to see Dustin. They didn't really make a point of hanging out anymore, but Steve was always there when Dustin needed help with his hair or his love life...though the latter was still nonexistent. "You coming in?" Steve opened the door wider and Dustin pushed past him, smiling again when he saw Eleven.

"Hey, El!" he greeted her with a wave. "Ready for school?" El nodded, having learned her lesson.

"She *thinks* so," Steve clarified, returning to the table. "Want some Eggos?"

"El's not allowed to have Eggos for breakfast," Dustin reminded him.

"Yeah well, I'm in charge," Steve argued, picking a waffle up and taking a bite out of it. "It's El's first day of school, and they're her favorite. You don't want one?"

"I didn't say that." Dustin reached out and took a waffle of his own from Steve's plate as El continued to finish hers. When she was done, she jumped up to her feet and deposited her plate in the sink, glancing towards the coffee machine. Was she mistaken, or was there a little bit left? When Steve wasn't looking she took a mug from the cupboard and poured the remaining coffee into it. Hopper had a strict "no coffee for El" rule because he was convinced that it made her too jittery to control her powers, but El thought that was stupid. She had excellent control, and who was anyone else to tell her otherwise? They didn't know anything about her powers, not *really*.

But of course, Hopper was right. It did make her jittery.

El returned to the table and took a huge sip of the bitter drink, wiping away the small bit that dribbled down her chin with the back of her hand. Steve looked at her disapprovingly, raising his eyebrows.

"I'm tired," she offered in explanation, yawning dramatically for effect. She didn't actually like coffee that much and it was cold, but she did like giving Steve a hard time and seeing how much she could get away with. And she really could use a little extra energy.

"Yeah, right. Just because I let you have Eggos doesn't mean I'm bending the coffee rule." Steve leaned over and gently pushed the mug away from her mouth with his index finger. "Besides, this stuff will only make it worse. You'll rely on it too much." He plucked the mug from her hand and poured the small amount that remained down the sink.

"I won't *rely* on it," she disagreed. She didn't understand how that could happen. Maybe it happened to other people, like Hopper, but it wasn't going to happen to her. Sometimes El thought herself above things like that...mostly because she just didn't understand the science behind caffeine addiction. "Fine. Tastes bad anyways," she told him, tucking her hair behind her ears.

"Just wait El, a couple years and we'll all be caffeine addicts," Dustin laughed, finishing up his Eggo. "All high schoolers are, right Steve?"

"Yeah, yeah." Steve glanced towards the clock on the microwave, startled by the time. "Jesus, you kids gotta get moving."

"Aw, shit!" Dustin glanced at the clock and had a similar reaction. "C'mon El, let's go!" Dustin rushed towards the door and swung it open, bolting down the stairs. He tripped about halfway down and would have fallen the rest of the way if it weren't for Steve catching the collar of his shirt.

"Watch it," Steve reprimanded. "Promise me you'll at least get *Jane* to the Byers' safely, alright?" The emphasis put on her legal name elicited a groan from El, but it was the number one rule. Now that she was going to school, there was a whole new set of rules that needed to be followed and this time they weren't just for her.

Number 1: Her name is Jane Eleanor Hopper. Whenever Eleven is in public she *must* be referred to as Jane. If she wanted to start going by Eleanor in a year or two it could be discussed, but otherwise everyone who knew the truth had to be very careful.

Number 2: When out, Eleven should never be alone. Hopper had already made sure that at least one of her current friends would be in each of her classes.

Number 3: Biking to school is allowed, but all other trips to town must be chaperoned by Steve or Hopper.

Number 4: Eleven comes home right after school unless otherwise discussed, in which case curfew is 7pm.

Number 5: Absolutely *no* powers.

Somehow, even though she was being granted more freedom El had graduated from three rules to five. They were the new "don't be stupid" rules and they were even harder to follow than the originals, but if they managed to do a good enough job and stay safe then one by one, he'd promised her they would go away.

"We'll be fine," Dustin grumbled. "I've biked to Will's a thousand times, you think I can't get there? I'm not an idiot."

"I know you're not, but you've got a history of losing your friends," Steve reminded him with a smirk. "Which reminds me, *no* racing. Got it?"

The boy rolled his eyes. Two years later people really should be over that, but of course they weren't. He'd never live it down. "Not cool, Steve, not cool," he muttered, turning away. But it was all in good fun, and racing probably wasn't the best idea today. Dustin knew that the rules would become more relaxed as the year went on without any incidents, but if there was a day to bend the rules it wasn't today.

El followed her friend outside and grabbed the handle of her bike- a Christmas present. Steve followed them outside as well and ruffled El's hair playfully.

"Alright, champ. Have a good day, okay? Don't do anything I wouldn't." El's lips turned up in a smile and she gently swatted his hand away, smoothing out her hair.

"You'll be here at...three fifteen?" she asked him.

"Three fifteen," Steve confirmed with a nod.

Dustin was eager to get going, so with a quick, "Bye, Steve!" he hopped on his bike and started heading down the driveway. "Come

on, El! Sorry, uh, *Jane!*" The other teenager wasn't far behind, hopping on the bike in a similar fashion and following him. Before they rounded the corner El turned around and waved goodbye to Steve. She nearly lost her balance on the bike in doing so, but a brief moment of intense focused fixed that.

No powers starting...now.

She had to pedal a little faster to catch up with Dustin, but El didn't mind. She'd only biked this route once when they'd done a little "test drive," and before that she'd been confined to the driveway as she learned the mechanics of it all. The boys biked everywhere they went so she anticipated it being a little hard to keep up at first, but she didn't mind. It was so freeing, being able to zoom away from the house like this. El closed her eyes for just a moment, feeling the breeze comb through her hair and gripping the handles tightly. She could get used to this.

Her bike had been her favorite Christmas present, but it wasn't the only one that meant something to her.

Christmas, El had decided, was the best time of the year. She hadn't gotten to celebrate it last year, so this time she'd made sure that she and Hopper went all out. He refused to put lights on the outside of the cabin, but to make up for it they'd strung colorful lights all over the inside. Joyce Byers, as it turned out, had plenty to spare. He'd also brought home a Christmas tree, things to decorate it with, and some Christmas records. After Sara had died and he'd gotten divorced Hopper didn't celebrate Christmas much, but El gave him a new reason to. And after consulting with her friends about what to get her, he'd come up with the perfect idea.

It was Dustin who insisted that they all come over Christmas Eve and give it to her together, because, "Even if it's your money, we helped pick it out." Dustin had a present for her as well: a little mage figure from Dungeons and Dragons. It wasn't a lot, but it was the meaning that was important. It meant that she was officially a member of the Party. She was already technically a member, but Dustin liked for things to be made official, especially in D&D terms.

Christmas was a crazy time, but somehow all the kids had managed to get

to the cabin on Christmas Eve for the sake of celebrating El's first Christmas with her. Dustin loved the holidays, but they were almost boring when it was just him and his mom and a cat, so for him this was incredibly exciting. All the kids loved sharing new things with El, but this was Christmas! It was extra special, and even though Dustin knew that his little gift would take second place behind the bike and whatever Mike had gotten for her, he still wanted to do his part to make it special.

El was elated to see them all on Christmas Eve. She gave them each a hug and they gathered around the Christmas tree to exchange gifts. Dustin's wasn't wrapped; it just sat in his pocket as she opened everything else and handed out the gifts she'd picked out for them. Dustin's present from El was a massive bag of Three Musketeers bars, which was incredible, and Mike gave her a necklace with a sparkly "E" on it. Pretty lame in Dustin's opinion, but El's eyes lit up like nothing he'd ever seen. She did like pretty things, and it was probably the first necklace she'd ever owned.

After a little while of opening presents, there didn't seem to be any more under the little tree. "Alright, I think we've got one more outside," Hopper said meaningfully, pulling himself to his feet. The kids jumped up to follow him outside, leaving Dustin behind.

"Wait!" he tried to call, feeling for the tiny mage figure in his pocket. "Son of a bitch, wait for me!" He hadn't gotten to give it to her yet. By the time he made it outside, El was practically squealing with joy at the sight of her new bicycle. It was rare to see her so animated and excited, but the girl wasn't able to hold back. Even though she wasn't very good at saying thank you, the look on her face said it all.

"We'll have to teach you how to ride it once the snow melts," Hopper was saying as Dustin approached. "Then you can use it for school, how about that?" El nodded enthusiastically, giving everyone another hug, even Hopper. That bike meant that freedom was on the horizon- finally, they could start to leave everything else behind them.

It was freezing outside and no one had bothered with their coats, so one by one everyone started to head back inside for some hot chocolate. El was still examining her bike, looking over every inch of it. It was then that Dustin made his move.

"Hey, El?" he asked awkwardly. "I never got to give you my present."

Without explanation, he dropped the mage figure into her hand. El didn't say anything at first. She held the figure up to her face and examined it carefully, squinting to figure out what it was. "It's a mage," Dustin explained. "It means...well, see, Mike is the paladin, Will's the cleric, Lucas is the ranger, I'm the bard, and you're the mage. And Max is the zoomer...I guess." He shrugged, still not sure about that one, but he supposed it was fine. He didn't care if the redhead called herself a zoomer. "It means you're an official member of our Party. Friends forever." Once again she didn't say thank you with words, but the look on her face told him everything he needed to know.

The Byers' house was the first stop on their journey. When they arrived Dustin leapt off his bike and let it clatter to the ground, leaving El behind as she took a little more time to get off and push out the kickstand. Dustin was used to having a bike, but it was one of El's most prized possessions and she took very good care of it. Will had already opened the door by the time she caught up to her friend.

"Hey guys!" the small boy exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear. El couldn't understand it, but somehow Will was the most excited out of all them to start high school. It certainly showed.

"Hi, Will," El replied with a smile. Aside from Mike, Will was her best friend in the Party. His house was just about the only place she could go, so Steve drove her over here often when she started to get stir crazy and the two had bonded. They were both quiet and soft-spoken, and they'd both been through hell in a way that none of the others would ever understand. Will couldn't understand all El had gone through in the lab and she hadn't experienced the Upside Down for nearly as long as he had, but somehow they had connected. Will was like a brother to her.

"You ready for school, El?" Will asked excitedly. Eleven shrugged.

"Think so," she said, repeating her answer from earlier. But she gave him her best smile just in case he worried. It wasn't even fake, because his own smile was contagious.

Will grabbed his bag from where it sat next to the door and slung it over his shoulder. "Jonathan, can you help me with my lock?" he

called back into the house.

"Yeah, buddy!" Came the response. A moment later, Will's older brother appeared at the door. "Hey guys, how's it going?" he said with a crooked smile. "Excited for high school?"

El sighed, quickly tiring of being asked the same question. She forced another smile and nodded, while Dustin shrugged.

"I'm sure today will be great. Let's go get your lock fixed, hm?" He ruffled Will's hair playfully before pushing past him to get Will's bike out of the shed. His lock was rusted and kept on getting stuck, and Jonathan had to pry it off just about every time he used it.

While they were waiting, Will turned to Eleven. "El? Don't you think we should start the day off properly?" He gave her a coy smile and extended his hand to begin the secret handshake they'd developed over the summer. It had taken them weeks to perfect it, and El wasn't sure that Mike liked it very much, but it was fun. She extended her hand to begin the routine, when suddenly Dustin noticed something.

"Oh shit, El, your tattoo!" He pointed to the mark on her wrist. "We were supposed to cover it up! *Shit.*" El retracted her hand, eyes wide. She knew that was the kind of thing that people asked questions about- she had a wide bracelet she was supposed to wear to cover it up, but she'd forgotten it back home. "Mrs. Byers!" Dustin hollered as if it was the end of the world. He bolted back inside the house. "We need something to cover up Eleven's tattoo!"

"Dustin, come on!" Will complained, shaking his head in disapproval. Still, he looked to El with an encouraging smile. "Don't worry, my mom will figure it out." El nodded, hoping he was right. The two followed Dustin inside finding him and Joyce Byers in the kitchen.

"Alright, Dustin, slow down!" Joyce was saying. "We'll fix it, and Hop never has to know, okay?" She glanced up as Will and Eleven entered, giving them all a quick wink as she hurried off to her bedroom to return a couple of seconds later holding a small bottle of light, peachy liquid. "This should do the trick." She sat at the kitchen room table whilst the kids quickly gathered around her. Joyce carefully took Eleven's extended wrist in her hand.

"What's that?" Will asked.

"Foundation. It's makeup. Girls use it to cover blemishes, create a more even skin tone," Joyce explained as she covered the 011 tattoo in a small layer of liquid. As she rubbed it in, the kids watched as the black outline started to disappear.

"Blemishes," El repeated. She hadn't used much makeup- all she really had was the purple eye shadow and clear lip gloss that she'd worn to the Snow Ball. Hopper had made it very clear that she wasn't allowed to wear the eye shadow except for special occasions, which El thought was stupid, but that basically reduced her makeup knowledge to the lip gloss. Foundation was a completely foreign concept to her.

"Yeah, like a flaw," Dustin explained. Thanks to his mom, Dustin knew exactly what it was and he sighed in relief as Joyce painted the foundation over El's tattoo. It wasn't ideal because it would smudge, but it would work for today. "Thanks, Mrs. Byers," Dustin sighed.

A flaw? El looked down at her wrist again, frowning slightly at the notion. She had never thought of her tattoo as a flaw; it was just a part of her, and she had to cover it up so that people wouldn't ask questions the way Mike had the first night she met the boys. Suddenly she felt self-conscious about it, but if foundation was supposed to cover up flaws...well, it was working. The sight of her wrist without the tattoo was strange, but when Mrs. Byers pulled her sleeve back down she resolved not to think about it. "Thank you," she said, taking the tube of foundation when Joyce offered it to her.

"You're welcome, sweetie," she said kindly. "You might need to reapply a little more if it smudges, but a little bit goes a long way so be careful not to use too much. Where's your bag?"

Finally ready to go, the kids went back outside and hopped on their bikes. El took a moment to put the foundation inside of her pink pencil bag and re-zipped her backpack before tugging it over her shoulders. It was light today since she wasn't carrying anything except for her beloved stationary set and her pencils, but the boys assured her that textbooks would make it much heavier. El was

dreading that. Dustin led the way again as they headed down the road to get to Mike's. "Bye!" Dustin called to Mrs. Byers as they continued on their journey.

Mike's house was the next stop, and as always, the thought of seeing him gave El a fluttery feeling in her stomach. She loved all of her friends, but everyone knew she had a special place for Mike. He was in a category all on his own, even if that category still didn't have a name. She was also excited to officially meet his parents. She hadn't been allowed out very much and the Wheeler's were especially iffy, since she was the girl that Mike had hidden in their basement a couple years ago. But now she was legitimate; her name was Jane Hopper, she was Hopper's daughter from a fling with a woman in the city, she lived near Dustin, and she was starting at the high school. She still had to be careful, but she didn't have to hide anymore.

When they arrived at the Wheeler's Dustin leaped off his bike, again letting it clatter to the ground. Just like before, El more carefully stood hers upright before following him to the door with Will. Mrs. Wheeler was the one to open the door, her hair perfectly styled even this early in the morning.

"Good morning," she said, looking down at the kids. "Ready for school?" El resisted the urge to groan. Was everyone going to ask her that?

"Yeah, is Mike ready?" Dustin asked, wasting no time. They were already running late.

Karen nodded and turned around to call towards the kitchen, "Michael, your friends are here!" El glanced up towards the stairs, hearing some shuffling about when Mrs. Wheeler called for Mike. She smiled to herself knowing it must be him and was easily able to picture him scrambling about to get ready on time. He'd probably slept late, which she had been very tempted to do herself this morning. She was anticipating waking up early would be a daily struggle, which was why it would be really nice if Steve let her have some of that coffee.

"Coming, Mom!" Mike's voice rang down the stairs. Satisfied, Karen turned back to Dustin, Will, and El.

"I don't believe I've met you," she commented, tilting her head curiously and offering El a kind smile. "What's your name, honey?"

"Jane," Eleven replied, offering a small smile in return. One introduction down, about a thousand more to go.

"Well it's nice to meet you, Jane. Are you one of Mike's friends?" El nodded, her smile widening just a little more.

"Yes," she confirmed. An awkward moment of silence passed, filled only with the sounds of Mike clambering about upstairs. Mrs. Wheeler turned back towards the stairs, her eyes slightly narrowed.

"Michael!" she hollered again.

"Coming!"

Finally the lanky teenage boy tumbled down the stairs looking more than a little disheveled. His hair was wild and curly- it seemed to have curled up quite a bit over the summer. Just one of the many things that had changed, but El kind of loved it. Except today he didn't seem to have gotten a chance to do anything to it.

"Hey guys," he said, grinning at Dustin and Will. Then his eyes landed on El, who was stood on Will's right. "Uh...hi El." He gulped when their eyes met, his cheeks growing a little warmer. She didn't say anything, but her cheeks grew red as well.

"Sorry we're a little late," Will finally spoke up.

"Don't worry about it. Me, too," Mike muttered. He sat on the staircase and tugged on his sneakers, clumsily tying up the laces. When he was done, he grabbed his backpack and stepped outside, taking both of El's hands in his. "Ready for school, El?"

Coming from him, the question wasn't quite as irritating. But before she had a chance to answer, Mrs. Wheeler cut in.

"El? I thought her name was Jane?"

"Shit," Mike whispered, glancing down. His eyes landed on El's necklace, the one he'd given her, and he nearly murmured the curse

word again. "Necklace," he mouthed to her. El's eyes widened and she took her hands from Mike, stuffing the charm inside the collar of her shirt. They were making so many mistakes his morning.

"That's your middle name, right?" The sweet voice of Nancy Wheeler came from behind her mother. A moment later, she appeared in the doorway. "Eleanor, or something?"

"Yes," El nodded, looking towards Nancy gratefully. "Eleanor. I go by that, sometimes."

"Oh, alright..." Mrs. Wheeler was looking more and more confused by the second. "Nancy, you two have met?"

"Yeah, over the summer." Nancy shot El an encouraging smile and took a bite of her toast. "Mike introduced us."

"I see. And why wasn't I introduced to Jane, Michael?"

"Mom," Mike groaned, embarrassed at this whole encounter. "We're late, and we're leaving."

"Michael-" Mike had already grabbed El's hand and was leading her back towards the bikes parked in the driveway. With awkward waves, Dustin and Will took their leave as well. Karen sighed in annoyance and turned around to shut the door.

"Don't be too hard on him, Mom," Nancy advised with a smirk. "He's got a really big crush on her."

Lucas and Max would be meeting them at the end of the Wheeler's driveway, and from there they would ride to the high school together. Mike got his bike and adjusted his backpack, running his hand over his forehead and unsuccessfully trying to push his hair back. El frowned, concern coming across her face as she looked at him.

"You're tired," she observed.

"Yeah...rough night," he explained. "And I overslept. But I'm fine. I'm excited for today." El wasn't convinced. She approached him and

reached up to smooth down a bit of his unruly hair, tilting her head.

"Promise?" she asked meaningfully, searching his face.

"Yes, I promise." El nodded, satisfied for now. Still, she kept a hold of his hand as they waited for the rest of their friends. Maybe he was nervous or maybe he really did just have a bad night, but either way Mike's hand in hers was reassurance that they were in this together. And it wasn't just Mike- all six of them were going through this together. It didn't matter if they didn't fit in, because they all had each other. Maybe it was cheesy, but that was what El continued to remind herself.

Moments later, Lucas and Max approached in the distance. Lucas was on his bike and Max was holding onto the back of his seat riding along on her skateboard. As they drew closer, Max let go of the bike and kicked the back of her skateboard out from behind her, it spun quickly in the air then began to fall to the ground again. Catching the skateboard with same back foot, she skidded to a stop in front of the group. El had tried to ride the skateboard once or twice, but she had no sense of balance and it hadn't ended well. She wished she could do those fancy tricks.

"Hey El!" Max bumped her hip against the other girl's, giving her a quick wink when she noticed she and Mike holding hands. "So, anyone know of any demodogs I can fight?" She pretended to swing a bat. "Because I don't know about you, but I'd much rather being doing that than going back to *high school!*" Despite her words, the last two came out as a squeal of excitement. She couldn't wait to take on high school with her friends and her boyfriend, and to teach El all about it. After they'd gotten over their little misunderstanding, the two girls had become close as well. As the only two girls in the Party, each of them totally badass in their own way, it was inevitable.

"No," El disagreed lightly, cracking another smile.

Dustin groaned at Max's question. "No, no demodogs, and I'm beginning to think we're never gonna get to high school. The Chief is gonna kill me if I don't get El to school on time. Can we *please* go?" Normally he wouldn't be so uptight, but the police chief had him sufficiently intimidated and this morning had already been stressful

with both her tattoo and her name being a problem. Dustin was under the impression he would go to jail if he didn't keep everyone under control.

"Jesus, calm down," Lucas laughed. "We've got plenty of time, and we're going." El dropped Mike's hand only for the sake of getting on her bike. Dustin got on his, and Lucas looked back to make sure that Max had a good grip before they finally took off.

It was about a mile from Mike's house to the high school, which was conveniently right across the lot from the middle school. For Max and the boys it was weird to turn left instead of right, but for El it was all weird. The difference between the two school was obvious just by looking- at the middle school, the students were smaller and most of them were being dropped off by their parents, being hugged and kissed goodbye on the first day of school. A lot of the older kids were on their bikes.

By comparison, the high school lot was filled with cars, older teenagers leaned up against them gossiping or having a quick smoke before they went inside. El wrinkled her nose at the unpleasant sight of a couple making out inside of a car and tried not to get distracted by it as they rode by. The bike rack was right by the front entrance, so after hopping off El discreetly helped Will with his dysfunctional bike lock while everyone else got situated. Thankfully they weren't late and actually had a few minutes before they needed to get to class.

"What's up, freshmen?" A random voice behind them said mockingly. "Mommy couldn't take you to school today?" El turned around just in time to see an older teenager reach out his hands to ruffle both her and Will's hair. El shrunk back distastefully, gritting her teeth together and glaring as the boy headed inside, laughing to himself.

"Mouth breather," she accused, reaching up to smooth her hair back down. Between Steve, the wind, and now this guy it was probably a disaster, which wouldn't matter much except El knew other girls cared about that kind of thing.

"Just ignore it," Lucas advised. "They stop if they think you don't care."

Max let out a snort as she hung her arms around Will and El's shoulders. "Did you see the size of that pimple on his face? I thought Mount Vesuvius had already erupted." She laughed at her own joke which caused Will to giggle. Eleven joined in nervously a second later. "Yup, that kid's a mouth breather alright. Couldn't agree more *Jane*." Max emphasized her legal name for effect as if to remind them all that they were in public now.

"Why does it look so big all of the sudden?" Will asked, staring wide-eyed at the high school building.

"We'll get used to it," Mike figured. But El thought it was intimidating, too. She reached down to grab both Mike and Will's hands for comfort, squeezing them tightly. She vaguely heard Mike huff in annoyance beside her and he jerked his head back to shake his bangs out of his eyes, but she hardly noticed. Lucas had slid his arm around Max's shoulders.

"Alright, guys," Dustin said resolutely, adjusting his hat. "Let's go." Feeling much more dramatic than they looked, the group entered the school building. The first order of business would be to get their official schedules, then it would be divide and conquer.

Hey all! Ava here, and first I want to say thank you so much for clicking and reading the first chapter of this little story! This fanfic is a bit unique, so I want to take a moment to tell you guys about it!

First, this is a collaboration fanfic! My new friend wordsfromthefeatherquill and myself (AvianJen) have come up with a really cool plot that we think you guys will really enjoy and we are taking turns writing these chapters. Feel free to check out our individual accounts!

Second, this story is a collaboration in every sense of the word. We started writing this as a roleplay, which if you don't know is basically a story where two or more people have "control" of certain characters and take turns writing a story and responding to what the other person has written. It's super fun and very addicting! My job for this chapter was to take sections from both

of our posts and compile them together into a full chapter, and I want to make that clear because not every word in this chapter is my original writing.

We're super excited to be working on this unique project and eager to hear what you guys think of it! Please leave a review if you feel so inclined, and the next chapter will come courtesy of [wordsfromthefeatherquill](#)! Thanks everyone!

-Ava

2. The First Day

Math was Eleven's first class of the day. She wasn't sure how to do some of the problems but had understood more than she'd expected so that was encouraging. Lucas and Will were also in her class so they made sure to sit together. For the most part, they concentrated on the teacher and minded their own business. No one bothered them and the whole class was pretty quiet, a phenomenon that the teacher attributed to being the first day of high school.

Gym was second period, and that was cause for a little more concern. Nancy was recruited by Hopper to help Eleven prepare for school and El thought the pretty girl was an amazing teacher. Even Steve, annoying as she found him, schooled her on a bunch of things after he returned from his six month stay at the police academy. He'd started as a police officer in Hawkins almost immediately after graduating, much to Hopper's convenience. The Chief of Police quickly made use of his new recruit by making him babysit- *keep an eye* on his adopted daughter. Jonathan wasn't much of a tutor; El only saw him at Will's house, which had actually been quite a lot recently. He said he wasn't book smart but El definitely thought he was clever in his own way and he taught her about things that Nancy or Hopper never did! Like records and bands, she loved the music he listened to and the way he talked so much more when it was playing in the background. Jonathan would always seem excited whenever someone was interested in his music. Although she liked all of the songs he showed her, *Every Breath You Take* would always be her favourite song, no matter what.

El had gym with Max which she was happy about. She had played a round or two of rudimentary baseball before with Steve but that was all of her athletic experience. The boys never had anything good to say about gym class which made her *very* nervous. Her goal was to keep up with the redhead, who El knew was great at most physical activities. They ended up not playing any sports during class which was fine by El as that would have ended in disaster. Their young teacher, Coach Reynolds, led the class in completing the Presidential Physical Fitness Test instead.

Much to Max's displeasure, having your gym class separated by gender meant that both her and El had to attend the same class as Stacey Jenkins and her flock of sheep. Luckily, the group of girls steered clear of them which was probably helped by the death glare Max had sent Stacey the moment she stepped foot into the gymnasium. El hadn't seemed to notice that.

It had been going on for months and now that Lucas had officially asked her be his girlfriend, Max knew she really had to sort out the 'El thing' once and for all.

After the night El closed the gate, Max was grounded for what felt like an eternity. Not only did her mother not know where she was, she had no clue who she was with. Yup, you guessed it, she wasn't particularly happy to find out it was a bunch of her male classmates. During her sentence, it was surprisingly easy to avoid the inevitable but once she was no longer grounded the boys began inviting her along to evenings at the cabin or Saturdays at the Byers. The days were still cold so she would blame the weather, or sometimes the fact she had chores to do when she got home. When the days started to get longer, Max began to run out of excuses. They'd now seen each other a handful of times since Eleven ignored Max's handshake. A couple of times at the Byers and at a few birthday parties over the past few months.

It was late May and especially hot for the last day of school. Finally, middle school was over and they were free for the summer. Max, Dustin, Lucas and Will had rushed to the lake after they got out to try and get a good spot before all the high schoolers turned up. Mike wasn't with them because he'd promised to go see El and they all knew he never cancelled on her. Dustin had even asked him to ask the Chief to let El join them at the lake but Mike was pretty sure that wouldn't happen.

Even though her friends were disappointed, Max couldn't help but feel happy that El wouldn't be coming. It's not like they ever spoke. Max would say hello instantly, whenever she saw her, but Eleven would ignore her or mumble a greeting and make no eye contact. Max had no idea why this girl didn't like her and as time went on, the less she saw of the wonderful El the better.

They'd been sunbathing for what felt like hours. Will's ghostly complexion

had warmed slightly, the bridge of his nose and tip of his ears turned pink. Dustin was fast asleep on his side, his exposed left arm growing dangerously red. Lucas seemed most at ease, slurping on his Dr. Pepper and reading a science textbook. Max was smothered in sun lotion and wearing one of Lucas's bucket hats to protect her pale skin from the intense sunlight. One thing she had learnt from being raised in California was to cover up... especially if you're ginger.

"Hey...is that Mike?" Will's small voice filled the comfortable silence, his question grabbing everyone's attention.

"Yeah...that is Mike...is he with someone?" Lucas added in a confused tone, sitting up and leaning on his elbows to get a better look.

Mike stood on the other side of the lake holding hands with a girl. They were making their way towards the bridge. Max couldn't believe it, "is that... Eleven?"

All three boys glanced at Max and then back to Mike and the girl accompanying him. They all spoke hurriedly at the same time,

"No way..."

"Holy fuck!"

"Let's go." Will jumped to his feet and the rest of the group followed him to meet the couple at the bridge.

Max hung back, contemplating her next move. A normal hello had never worked before, should she say something else? She watched as the boys reached Eleven, grinning like lunatics as she hugged each of them one by one. After pulling away from Lucas, the last friend to hug, she stood back slightly to look at Max.

"We didn't expect to see you here, El," Max said, giving the girl a half-hearted smile. Eleven didn't react, as usual, and continued to stare blankly back at Max. Max's eyes jumped to Will's who gave her a sympathetic look and then to Lucas's but he only gave her a shrug. What was with this girl?

El soon peeled her eyes from Max and continued to speak with the boys. Behind the huddle, Max noticed Stacey and her friends walking towards

them. They were giggling, most likely at something stupid, when Max noticed Stacey pointing in Eleven's direction.

"So El, you ready for a swim?" Mike's enthusiastic voice broke Max's thoughts and all of the attention fell on the curly headed girl.

"I-I...don't know how," she stammered.

Milliseconds later, an ear piercing laugh broke the silence that El's confession had just caused. Stacey and her followers spread themselves out among the group with Stacey edging closer towards Mike and Eleven.

"You can't swim?" Stacey shrieked. "Are you a baby?" Her gang mimicking the cries of babies around them.

"Shut up, Stacey," Mike spat and turned his head slightly, noticing El's eyes narrowing beside him. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it tight, hoping she would remember Hopper's most important rule before she did something she would regret.

"You need Mikey here to fight your battles for you, do you honey?" Stacey continued in a condescending voice, trying to distract Eleven from looking at Mike. "Who are you anyway? Supposedly the Chief's daughter, or so I heard...more like a bitch who should go back-"

"Oi slutface!" Everyone spun on their heels to face Max behind them. "That's enough. Jane doesn't have to answer to you, so do us all a favour and fuck off."

The teenage girls had now gathered closer to Max, letting out a unison of displeased hisses. "Oh look, it's redhead, miss me?" The girls giggled annoyingly and Max wrinkled her nose in response.

"Well it was a lot easier to get around when your fat ass wasn't in the way," Max shot back quickly, slowing walking closer towards Stacey. Dustin failed to stifle his laugh and soon the boys had erupted in small chuckles. Mike allowed a small smile to creep onto his lips and he sent El a sideways glance. He noticed she was fixated on Max, her eyes hardly leaving the girl, a hint of confusion shadowing her features.

Max was now in front of Stacey, maintaining eye contact with her. "You've got a mouth on you Mayfield-" Stacey grabbed either side of

Max's arms and pushed her back so her body dangled over the lake's edge, "you should learn when to keep it shut!"

"Leave her alone!" Lucas called from behind them, ready to run and help his girlfriend. But he didn't have to as the group watched Max muster all her strength and shove Stacey hard. Stacey flew backwards and landed on her back end with a thud, her own friends hardly able to contain their laughter.

"Bite me, Stacey," Max teased as she peered down at the girl. The rest of the Party had started to surround Max for support. "Now, listen to me, this is the last time you speak or even look at Jane Hopper, you hear me? You're not all that Stacey Jenkins and that's probably why you're a single pringle..." She sang the last part of the sentence and the boys started to giggle again. "At least Jane and I had dates to the Snow Ball, heck, I'm pretty sure we have dates to Homecoming too," she continued, sarcasm dripping from her words. Max briefly looked over at Lucas who was wearing a proud expression. Max crouched down on one knee so she was on the same level as Stacey, "who are you going to your first high school dance with Stacey?"

Stacey's glistening eyes bore into Max's for a few seconds before she scurried off without saying another word, her friends in toe.

Max's friends rounded on her, cheering and whooping. "Way to go, Max," Will grinned at her and Dustin gave her a high five.

"Guys, it's not like I won the World Series," Max mumbled, embarrassed by all the attention.

They began to quieten down when a gentle, high pitched voice spoke up. "Did you do that for me?" Max glanced over her shoulder at Eleven, who was staring intently at her. At first Max was taken back by her question, not quite sure how to react. The boys began to exchange nervous glances; they all knew that was probably the most Eleven had ever said to Max. "Max?" El asked after a few seconds of silence.

Max started to nod her head, "yeah, I mean, I'd do it for any member of the party."

"Party," Eleven repeated under her breath. "I didn't like you," she blurted

out. The sentence hung in the air for a while as the boys exchanged glances again. Dustin let out a long, low whistle.

"You don't mean that, El," Mike started in a slightly higher voice than usual.

"Let her finish," Max interrupted him, waving her hand in his face. The boys backed off as the girls moved closer together.

"You didn't? Why?" Max asked.

El's eyes raced around her sockets, Max could tell she was looking for the right words. "Last year, I left and came to the school." A small gasp escaped one of the boys behind them but Max was too interested in El to know who. "I saw you and Mike, in the gym. He was happy, you were happy, laughing. I was...angry. Pushed you off your skateboard." El hung her head in shame.

Realization dawned on Max. "I knew it! I knew I didn't fall! I never fall off my board...you threw me off...that's...that's..." Max gave El a nudge with her shoulder so she would look at her, "pretty bitchin'."

El beamed, recognising the word. Max carried on, "Mike is so not my type, you've got nothing to worry about. He's aaaall yours." Max nodded, keeping eye contact with Eleven who paused then returned the nod. "So... can we be friends now?"

El nodded and hastily took Max's hands in her own. "Friends."

Behind them, the boys had been watching the whole exchange. Mike was blushing a crimson red which Dustin had noticed right away. He gave his friend a reassuring pat on the back.

"She threw Max off her skateboard because she thought she liked me?" Mike gawped in disbelief.

"Remind me to never get on El's bad side," Will added, equally as shocked.

The girls turned and smiled at their friends, arms linked as if nothing had happened. Lucas couldn't help but wonder how alien their behaviour was to him. "Girls," he muttered, rolling his eyes. The rest of the boys murmured in agreement.

El put her best foot forward in gym and it actually went okay. Max was a lot better at the pull-ups than her but she still didn't do too badly. In fact, to Max it almost seemed like she did a little *too* well. Both of the girls had caught the attention of the gym teacher.

"Maxine and...Jane, is it?" Coach Reynolds asked when she pulled them aside.

El nodded while Max corrected her. "Well it's Max, actually."

"Max it is! I just wanted to let you girls know how impressed I was with you today. You both did a great job." She smiled at them, showing off her perfectly straight teeth. "I was thinking of starting up an all-girls softball team this year for the freshman, would either of you be interested?"

It was obvious that softball was some kind of sport, but joining a sports team was not something El had considered. Would Hopper even want her to do that? Probably not, if it would take time away from her studies. After a moment of contemplation, she offered a tiny smile and shrugged. "Not right now," she said, deciding that was the best option. Once she figured out what softball was and if she was allowed to do it, she could give her a better answer.

Coach Reynolds eyes were now fixated on Max. "Uh..." the girl stalled. If El wasn't planning on trying out then she certainly didn't have to. She fleetingly glanced at her friend, attempting to read her features. Over the past few months, the girls had been hanging out more and Max had quickly realised El worried a lot. And by a lot, she basically meant *all the freakin' time*.

At first, Max was just so glad they were finally friends that it made it easy to not notice. But then one of the last days of summer rolled around and Max was watching the boys mollycoddle El for the millionth time. That's when she made a mental note to spend their freshman year toughening El up and bringing her out of her shell. For someone so powerful, it was hard for Max to believe that El lacked so much confidence.

She looked back at her teacher; there was something so encouraging

about the look she was giving her that made it hard to say no. Max shrugged. "Sure, I don't see why not."

The teacher beamed at her response. "Wonderful! I'll be holding tryouts in a couple of weeks so keep an eye on the bulletin board. And Jane..." she turned to look at the girl who stood quietly beside them, "if you change your mind, just let me know and you can come along with Max okay?"

El smiled at her and the girls bid farewell to the teacher before heading into the locker room, which was more or less deserted at this point. Max gave El a light nudge with her elbow. "You're not worried about joining, are you? Because you shouldn't be!"

"I'm not worried," El replied. "I just..."

"I think you should join," Max interrupted. "It'd be nice to have something to do together... without the boys. We always do what they want and there's only so much D&D a girl can take." That wasn't totally true. It was true that they played D&D a lot, usually at the request of one of the boys, but Max really didn't mind. They'd even created a character for her so she could join in, which was nice. But she'd never tell them that. "And who says you shouldn't have hobbies that don't involve the boys? You're your own person E-Jane," Max hastily corrected herself as a group of their classmates passed by.

Following her friend's line of sight, El noticed their peers too. "I *know* I am," she said defensively, watching as the group exited the locker room. It was true the boys babied her quite a bit and she never argued for what she wanted to do around them, that wasn't the trouble here. Maybe she was a bit socially inept but she'd done plenty of things on her own before. "I don't know what softball is," she admitted, lowering her voice even though no one was around. "And I don't know if he'll let me." He, of course, referring to Hopper.

"You know what baseball is, right? There's a bat and ball, same concept but in softball, the bats are thinner and the balls are softer." Max did a mediocre impression of using a bat to hit a ball then shrugged before continuing. "Don't worry about Hopper. I'm sure he won't mind. Besides, you're a normal kid now... just like the rest of us." She gave El a wink as she put on her rucksack. Max knew Hopper

regularly said it, El told her all the time, and she really hoped he meant it because she knew that all her friend wanted was to be like everyone else.

"Normal," El repeated, a hint of a smile coming across her face as she closed her gym locker. Normal was something that Eleven knew she'd never be, no matter how many times Hopper or her friends told her otherwise. But she could try, and there was nothing to stop her from appearing normal to the rest of the world. Encouraged by her friend's words, she nodded. "If you do it, then I will," she decided. She wasn't sure she'd like it, but why not give it a try? She had to try things if she was going to figure out what she actually did like doing.

"I'll try out, what have I got to lose?" Max grinned, linking arms with her friend. She gestured towards the door. "Ready to grab some lunch?"

The girls arrived in the cafeteria before the boys so they quickly found themselves a large enough table for the whole party. A few minutes later the boys arrived in the cafeteria doorway and found the girls fairly easily, making a move to secure their spots before the rest of the freshmen flooded the room.

"How was gym?" Max asked as Lucas plonked himself in the available seat beside her. On her other side sat El who was already tucking into her sack lunch.

"Oh, you know, we killed it." Lucas raised his arm and flexed his bicep muscle, which actually did exist after spending the entire summer doing yard work for his neighbours.

Dustin positioned himself in the seat opposite Max and snorted at his friend's comment. "Uh, no you didn't! Remember the part when you tripped on your shoelace and fell on your face?"

"Did not!" Lucas retorted defensively, blushing furiously. He had, but he didn't want *Max* to know that. "Anyway it wasn't my shoelace, it was a pencil. Totally not my fault."

As Max giggled at their bickering, Mike made a beeline for the empty

seat next to El. Will, clearly oblivious, quickly scooted around him and took the chair before Mike had the chance to. The boy froze in his position, awkwardly hovering next to the table.

"Dustin doesn't smell that bad, Mike," Will grinned upwards at his taller friend who glared at him in response. Mike proceeded to chuck his bag on the floor and unhappily sat in the chair beside Dustin. He crossed his arms tightly across his chest, allowing his brow to furrow as he watched Will and El's conversation intently.

He knew it was stupid to get mad over not being able to sit next to El but he couldn't help himself. Will was always just *there*, which Mike had begun to notice a lot more recently and it had started to get on his nerves. Didn't Will know how he felt about El? Didn't everyone? Why was he getting in his way and hogging all of her attention?

Dustin had to wave his hand back and forth in front of Mike's face to pull him from his thoughts. "Earth to Mike, come in Mike."

Mike swatted his friend's hand away and realised that El was trying to get his attention too. "Huh? Oh, you realised I'm alive now?" He snapped, sarcasm laced throughout his words.

Lucas raised his eyebrows at the reaction and formed his lips into an "O" shape, exhaling and making brief eye contact with Dustin. Something was definitely going on with Mike, especially in relation to Will. Lucas thought that he knew what it was but it wasn't his place to point it out.

El shot Mike a confused, slightly hurt look then quickly glanced at Will next to her. Although she didn't completely understand how to use it, El knew what sarcasm was. What she couldn't understand was why Mike would be sarcastic with her.

The look she sent him caused Mike to soften slightly. "Sorry, I'm just tired," he lied whilst uncrossing his arms, "what were you saying?"

Although she wasn't exactly sure why, El knew that Mike wasn't acting normal and something was on his mind. She leaned forward to reach for one of his hands under the table and played with his fingers, weaving them in between hers. She was trying to be subtle in

her actions but ended up having to reach so far that it was anything but. Her voice, on the other hand, was barely audible in the loud cafeteria. "Come over later? I need...help with math," she added quickly, trying to save it. That was true, she did need a little bit of help with the math homework but mostly she wanted the chance to help Mike feel better, whatever was wrong. She knew that she could help him feel better just like he had always helped her. He was never like this when they were alone, even though that happened rarely. *Very* rarely thanks to Hopper and Steve's constant chaperoning, but that didn't mean he couldn't come over for a little while.

When her angelic voice asked him over that evening, Mike felt like a jerk for the way he'd been behaving. El, was no doubt, Mike's favourite person and how could he ever doubt that he wasn't hers too? She was asking him over to her house, not Will. She was holding his hand under the table, not Will's. Her cheeks glowed a light shade of pink and Mike couldn't help but think it was him making her nervous, *not Will*.

"Yeah, I'll come over," his insides were squirming with delight and in an attempt to maintain any dignity he had left, Mike leaned over the table and quickly pressed his lips on top of El's.

"Holy shit!" Dustin's exclamation caught Lucas and Max's attention and they looked up to see Mike and El locking lips across the table. Will, who's positioning at the table had now become a little awkward, rolled his eyes playfully at his friends. First, Mike was ready to kill him and now he was trying to eat El. He let out a low chuckle at the thought and leaned back on his chair to get a better view of Max, Dustin and Lucas. He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively, teasing their friends' behaviour, which made them all laugh.

They all knew that Mike and Eleven had kissed before but the two were usually discreet about it and they had never *seen* it. Mike, however, was surprising everyone today. The remainder of the party were shocked and maybe a little impressed at their friend's boldness. "Balls move, Wheeler," Max mused in approval.

Mike had completely lost focus of what was going around him until El broke away from the kiss, her brown eyes wide. He noticed her cheeks glowing redder than they were before which caused electricity

to pulsate through him. He fell back into his chair, eyes still firmly on El who bit down on her bottom lip to keep from smiling too much. Eventually, she broke eye contact with him to look down at her lunch. "Okay," she said softly in response to his answer. She couldn't help but smile a little bigger at the thought of spending the whole afternoon with him.

"Dude," Dustin said, still shocked. "What was that?" He punched Mike playfully on the upper arm as Lucas smirked. Max's eyebrows were raised expectantly and Will's eyes were wide, awaiting an answer.

Shrugging at Dustin's comment, a goofy grin spread across Mike's face as he imagined what he'd get up to with El after school.

Hey, Alice (wordsfromthefeatherquill) here! Thanks for reading my first chapter, I hope you all liked it.

As Ava explained in her chapter, this story is based on our roleplay we've created together. We've got such a cool story planned so we just had to share it and get other fans feedback on it so please do leave a review!

We won't be able to update too often otherwise we will catch up with where our roleplay currently is too quickly so please don't hate us. Just make sure you're following this story so you get alerted when we update :)

Can't wait to hear what you all think :) good morning, day or night, wherever you are! See you all next time, take it away Ava!

3. After School Club

After school Lucas and Max broke off from the group first, Max hanging onto the back of Lucas's bike. They'd adopted this way of travel soon after the incident last year and it had stuck.

Lucas always wanted to escort Max home. Even though his house was closer, they would always go by Max's first. As her house appeared in the distance, she could just make out her stepfather's car in the driveway. Max tugged on Lucas's sleeve so he would slow down to a stop.

"I can walk from here," she smiled unconvincingly at him. "He's back from work," she said, pointing towards her house, "so I'll just walk from here. You nearly got to my door, though, Stalker!" She gave him a wink, knowing it would fluster him. She succeeded and for a second he was knocked off his game, but he quickly managed to regain his composure.

"When can I *actually* come to your door, Max?" he asked her. "Billy isn't there anymore and we don't even have to tell your mom and your stepdad we're dating, but I..." he struggled for the right words, "I don't like being a secret." He had some suspicions as to why she didn't want him to come over but it didn't bother him nearly as much in theory as it might in real life. Lucas liked to think he was tougher than he was so he thought he could handle it. "I could just say hi and leave, right?"

They'd been gone out as a couple on occasion since making their relationship official. They had gone to the lake over the summer without the others, they'd gone to the arcade together several times too. Max had even come over to his house once or twice to play a board game or watch a movie. However, Max never seemed to want him to come over to *her* house. When it was summer he'd understood; Lucas was very aware of how Billy felt about him and even though Max had dealt with him last fall, neither of them really wanted to reopen that can of worms. But Billy had left for college on some basketball scholarship last week which had caused Lucas to think that coming over would finally be okay.

Max sighed and gave him a meaningful look, she knew that she couldn't keep saying no; it wasn't realistic. He was her boyfriend, and it made sense for him to visit her home. She was naïve to think that this moment wouldn't come. Lucas was a nice boy, and after meeting his family over the summer, she knew he had been brought up properly. She should have known he would be eager to meet her parents.

Billy had been the only excuse she needed before. Neither she nor Lucas wanted to spend any time around him which meant Max's house was a no-go zone. But now that her douche of a stepbrother had left town everything should be fine, right?

Wrong... Billy learned it from somewhere. As they say, the apple never falls far from the tree.

Neil Hargrove was just like his son, only worse. Where his son was hot-headed and unpredictable, Neil was manipulative and sly and Max had a scary suspicion that he'd probably get away with murder if he put his mind to it. Her mom married Neil in the summer of 1983, a year before they made their move to Hawkins.

Max's real dad landed himself in prison when she was eight whilst they were living in Sacramento. Her memories of that time had become a little hazy over the years but there was one that always stuck with her. It was of her father's parents taking her to visit him in jail. She could remember a smaller version of herself watching him through the glass while he spoke to her through a telephone that connected the prisoners to the outside world. He had red hair, just like her, although she recalled his was brighter... or maybe that was just her imagination.

"You're my number one, Maximillian, no matter what," he told her fervently. "And you're gonna grow up into an amazing person, a much better one than I could ever be... don't let any knucklehead tell you otherwise, alright?"

After that visit Max never saw her father again. Her mother packed up their station wagon that night and drove them across the state to San Diego. She cried the whole way.

The divorce came next and they never spoke of Ben Mayfield again. Countless boyfriends followed, some of them bearable but most of them lame. Then, in waltzed Neil. At first, Max thought he was an improvement but that wasn't exactly saying much. He would always bring her gifts and he never called her Maxine. She saw her mom smile around him and for the first time, in a long time, she finally seemed happy. That was until... Max shuddered at the thought, snapping her out of the memories.

Lucas's dark eyes were staring at her, anticipating her answer. She couldn't help but let out a sigh. "Okay but only to the driveway, and we're avoiding Neil at all costs." She couldn't help but laugh at the look that overcame his face.

"Really?" He grinned broadly, slipping his hand into hers and giving it a squeeze, "cool."

He had to let her hand go to walk his bike up to the driveway but he did so with a little extra skip in his step. When they approached the driveway he held to his word and stopped but not before leaning over and giving her a peck on the cheek. "I'll see you tomorrow, Max," he said, waving her off. Once she was safely inside, Lucas hopped back on his bike and headed back in the direction they'd come from, turned a corner and biked down the street to his house. The wide grin still plastered on his face.

Susan was the first to greet Max when she opened the door. She'd seen her daughter's fiery red hair down the street, skating alongside some boy. The color of his skin certainly hadn't gone unnoticed but luckily Neil was in the other room watching the news. Thankfully Susan was less biased. However, while Susan wouldn't be bothered by Max having a friend, she was slightly concerned when she saw the boy kiss her daughter's cheek. Especially as she'd never even seen him before.

"Max, sweetheart!" Susan smiled when the teenage girl opened the door. "How was your first day?" She glanced out the window just in time to see the boy getting on his bike and leaving. "Who's your friend?"

"What? Oh, that's Lucas... he's just a friend from school," Max

stammered, mentally kicking herself for being so stupid.

"Oh? Well, he seems like a nice boy." Susan wasn't prejudiced like Neil was, but Max couldn't help but panic.

"Yeah... I mean, he is," Max replied nervously, her eyes darting to the hallway beside her. "I have a ton of homework to start," she blurted, making a turn to leave.

"If you're going around kissing some boy, sweetie, you know we-"

"Mom!"

"I need to meet him," Susan hastily corrected herself. They exchanged a look and somehow, Max understood that they were on the same page about this. She would love for her mom to meet Lucas, but Neil... Neil couldn't know.

"Okay," the redhead agreed softly, nodding her head.

One by one, the friends began to break apart as they went home. El could have sworn she saw Max send a wink her way as she headed off with Lucas but the other girl never understood what that meant. They drove straight past Mike's house and shouted goodbye to Will as they passed his. Then Dustin went his separate way and it was just her and Mike, alone at last.

"Race?" El suggested, glancing towards him with a mischievous smile. Mike smiled back, the sight making her heart skip a beat.

"Yeah," he agreed, "ready, set, go!" The teenager took off, speeding down the street towards Hopper's trailer. El wasn't far behind but she wasn't nearly as fast as Mike. Good thing that could be easily fixed. Staring ahead, she focused her energy on the pedals beneath her feet. They began to rotate faster, faster and faster until she sped ahead of Mike and nearly crashed into Steve's car. She tried to activate the brake with her mind but she was too fast and the wheels jerked to a stop, the bike falling to the side.

"No!" El screamed as she hit the ground, the bike falling on top of her. Well, that hadn't gone as planned. El grumbled, shoving the bike

off and pulling herself to her feet. She brushed the dirt off her jeans and examined herself; she wasn't bleeding but her knee would probably bruise.

"El!" Mike's sweet, concerned voice called out to her from behind as he hurried to catch up. "El, are you okay!"

"Yes," El replied. She took a moment to pull her bike back to an upright position and push out the kickstand with her foot before glancing up at Mike. "I won," she announced proudly, smiling from ear to ear.

Mike laughed as he got off his bike, taking a moment to set it upright as well. "No," he disagreed, "you cheated. You used your powers."

"You didn't say no powers," the girl pointed out smugly. She adjusted her bag on her shoulders and skipped up to the front door, pushing it open.

"I guess that's true," Mike admitted with a shrug before following her inside. El smiled, knowing that if she was one of the boys he would have put up a fight for the winner's title but he hadn't. He didn't seem to mind losing against her, which was nice, Eleven liked winning.

"Hey, El!" Steve, having heard them come in, hopped up from his place on the couch. He was wearing his blue police uniform and had *The Cosby Show* playing on TV. "How was your first day?" His bright grin faltered when he saw a very nervous-looking Mike Wheeler standing next to her. "What is he doing here?"

"El invited me," Mike mumbled, "hope that's alright?" He sent Eleven a nervous glance, who nodded firmly in Steve's direction.

"We're going to do homework," she claimed. Surely Steve would be okay with that?

"Hey, you can't pull that one on me. I know what's going on here," Steve claimed, pointing an accusatory finger at Eleven. "The Chief didn't say anything about a play date. He finds out and my ass is grass, just like last time. Remember that?" Steve ran his hand through his hair and stared both her and Mike down, determined not to be

swayed.

Last time, of course, was in reference to the incident a couple of weeks ago. Mike had come over to watch a couple movies while Hopper was at work and while Steve was being a negligent babysitter, the two younger teenagers had fallen asleep practically on top of each other. It was an accident and entirely innocent but Hopper had practically run Mike out of the house and Steve had gotten quite the lecture. El still felt bad about that; it had been weird to wake up to the feeling of Hopper getting her off Mike and she hadn't liked her friends getting in trouble over it. It was stupid, and it made her angry, but Mike hadn't been discouraged from coming over. Until she was given permission to go to the Wheeler's, any alone time with Mike had to be spent here.

"He won't be upset," El tried to defend herself. "I can have friends over. Mike is my friend... And I don't have *play dates*. I'm fourteen." That was a line she'd heard Dustin tell his mom a couple days ago when she'd finally been allowed over to his house and she thought it was rather clever. Play dates were for children and after two years of living with Hopper, El was much closer to being a typical American teenager than she was to being the lost, scared twelve-year-old the boys had found in the woods. Steve rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Mike is my friend," he imitated in a high-pitched voice. "No. We aren't playing that game." Then it was El's turn to roll her eyes; even if she didn't know what Max was trying to say when she winked at her, she knew exactly what Steve was doing.

"Look, I know you're some kind of... superhero," the older boy said, "but you can't read minds. At least... I don't think you can so how do you know the Chief won't care?"

"Because we won't cause any trouble," El insisted. She sighed, mirroring his action and running her hand through her own hair. When she met his eyes again, she gave him her saddest, most pleading expression. El's big brown eyes made it easy, and the puppy dog look worked much better on Steve than it did on Hopper. "Please don't make Mike go."

"Hey, that's not fair." Steve's eyes widened and he wagged his finger

at her. "I'm not getting in trouble today... Come on, it's your first day! You couldn't have waited a week or something?" Maybe El was crazy but he almost looked disappointed. Why on earth would he be disappointed?

"What's different in a week?" she asked.

"I.. I don't know, El. Forget it. Don't cause any trouble and... he can stay until five." El's face lit up and she exchanged a glance with Mike.

"Thank you," she said to Steve. Without another word she reached for Mike's hand and dragged him outside to the back deck, where Steve wouldn't be breathing down their necks. With a sigh, the older boy plopped back down on the couch, staring back at the television.

Among the outdoor furniture was a little love seat facing the lake, which of course was where El instructed Mike to sit. She sat down next to him, leaning against his shoulder and hugging her knees to her chest. For a moment she just closed her eyes, content to listen to the sounds of nature and having him beside her. They would get to the math homework... eventually. Home at last, she was free to tug the little "E" necklace he'd given her out from underneath her top and fiddle with it, running her thumb over the textured surface.

"Mike," she said finally, lifting her head to look at him. Normally she just wanted time with him, but today she actually had a purpose in asking him over. "Are you okay?" He'd been acting strange all day, and if there was something wrong she hoped that he would tell her now that they were alone. "Are you mad?"

"Mad? No, El, of course not." Hesitantly, he slid his arm around her shoulder and delicately ran his fingertips up and down El's arm. Goosebumps formed under his touch and El felt her brain turn to mush. She could hardly think about anything when he did things like that. Could he feel her goosebumps? Did he think that was weird? Could he hear how fast her heart was pounding? Little did she know how similar Mike's current anxieties were.

"I just didn't sleep well," Mike continued. "I was thinking a lot... mostly about how excited I was for today and for you to finally go to school. But I'm fine, I promise." He was quiet for a minute before

adding, "Actually more than fine. It was so cool to have you at school with us today," El smiled up at him and snuggled closer, inhaling deeply.

"I liked it," she said softly.

"Yeah?" Mike separated from her a bit but only to get a better look at her face. "You had a good day? I wasn't with you for all of it."

"Mmhmm," she hummed in response to Mike's question, lifting her head up again and straightening her posture a bit. "A little stressful this morning... forgot my bracelet." She held up her wrist and rubbed at it, smudging the leftover foundation to reveal the tattoo. Her eyes lingered on the mark. The *flaw*. With a shake of her head, she dismissed the thought, "then you told your mom the wrong name and I wore my necklace... and we were almost late and the mean boy."

"Woah, woah. I can't have been all bad, can it?" Mike interrupted. He noticed the way she frowned as she rubbed some of the foundation off of her tattoo and took her wrist, gently smudging the rest of it off with his thumb. He knew that she was self-conscious about it but she didn't need to be, not around him.

"No, not all bad," she replied as he finished rubbing the foundation away. They'd been through much worse, it had just stressed her out a little. "But tomorrow will be better," now that they had made some mistakes, they could fix those mistakes for tomorrow.

"Gym was fun," she added, mentally going through her day. She always liked being with Max, somehow she always challenged her in new ways and forced El to look at things differently. It was fascinating. "The teacher wants us to try out for softball, Max says it's like baseball. Don't know if I want to... said I would, though," she shrugged. What did she have to lose by trying out, really? If it was fun she'd do it and if it wasn't then there really wouldn't have been any harm done. She had a feeling that Steve would be excited at the prospect of her joining a sport.

"Softball?" Mike seemed a little surprised at that but he allowed his features to soften and gave her a nudge. "You'd be great. You should go for it."

"Max wants to, so I guess I will. But I liked having class with you," she added, thinking about the afternoon. Her two afternoon classes, Biology and English, had both been with Mike. They had mutually chosen each other as lab partners and she couldn't be more thrilled; he was the smartest person she knew, especially when it came to science, and she was excited about the experiment part. The teacher wasn't very interesting but Mike was probably a better teacher anyways. Mike was just happy that he'd asked her to be his partner before Will had gotten the chance.

She was most nervous for English because it was more comprehensive and less memorization. They'd arrived early enough so El could take a desk by the window and he sat directly next to her. Dustin and Max were also in their class so the redhead sat behind El and Dustin sat in front. They were all well aware of El's apprehensiveness towards English as a subject so Mike had made sure they were all close by to support her. The memorizing stuff would be fine but she was still learning how to communicate better via the spoken word. She still didn't talk like everyone else, so how was she supposed to write like everyone else?

El thought through the rest of her day, the fuzzy feeling in her stomach returning when she recalled the kiss at lunch. It happened so suddenly, out of nowhere. They didn't kiss very often; it was always special when they did and El usually knew when to expect it. Mike had always initiated it and it was always just the two of them. But today had been different and she'd liked that, too. She liked the idea of being spontaneous and not worrying, not thinking through every action before she did it.

With that in mind, she turned around and gently placed her hand on one side of his face before leaning up to kiss him again. Kissing was such a strange concept and El couldn't figure out why she liked it so much, but with Mike, she did. She never got tired of it.

They had shared a few kisses before but nothing like this one. Mike leaned in, his hands fumbling awkwardly until they found her hips to pull her closer. El's hands moved to grip the collar of his shirt to draw him nearer as well. All of his senses blurred, the only thing Mike could focus on was the girl in front of him. She was so beautiful and amazing and she felt exactly the same about him. Much too quickly

for Mike's taste she pulled away, just enough to look into his eyes. Her heart was racing in that way only he could cause. "That was the best part," she decided, her lips turning up into the tiniest of smiles. Mike gulped, seemingly unable to tear his eyes from her lips. The smile she gave him caused his body to automatically lurch forward in an attempt to kiss her again. El reacted by closing her eyes and leaning in..

But just as their lips touched, there came an unmistakable growl from behind them.

"Hey! What the hell's going on out here?" Jim Hopper appeared behind them, dressed in his police uniform with his arms crossed. El leapt to her feet in shock, turning to face him with wide eyes. Well, there went her promise to Steve that they wouldn't cause trouble.

"Homework," she said after a moment of contemplation. As if he would ever fall for that. Then, "you're early." Over an hour early, to be exact. That never happened, he was always late.

"Yeah, little bit." Hopper looked between his teenage daughter and her would-be boyfriend disapprovingly. "I don't see any homework out."

"It's here," the girl reached down and held up her bag. "Just math."

"Well, go do math then," Hopper said. "Inside. At the table." El nodded and tugged at Mike's shirt, wanting him to follow her inside. Before the boy could get inside though, Hopper's palm engulfed his shoulder, "just a second, Wheeler."

Inside now, El stopped and glanced back with concern. This was her fault and she didn't want Mike getting in trouble for it but the teenage boy nodded, offering her a reassuring smile.

"Go on, El," he said. The door swung shut and El dashed forward, putting her ear against it to try and hear what was going on. Steve stood anxiously behind her.

"What did I tell you?" he asked.

"Shh."

Outside, Hopper was none too happy. Similar to Steve, he'd come home early in hopes of seeing how El's day had gone and spending some extra time with her. But now, here Mike was. Again. No matter how scary he tried to be, Hopper couldn't seem to shake the persistent teenager. He'd tried being the scary dad before and Mike was never scared away long enough. Most people never knew a person as devoted to them as Mike was to Eleven, and Hopper supposed that was a good thing that he should encourage... but damn, he didn't *want* to. He wanted to be selfish, why did she have to grow up so fast?

"What did we talk about?" he asked Mike seriously. "Hands off," he doubted he could really intimidate the kid at this point but it was worth one more try. Mike's confident expression had melted away now that El wasn't watching anymore and he was wishing that he could disappear.

"Of course, I remember," Mike mumbled incoherently under his breath. However as soon as he met Hopper's expecting eyes, he swallowed hard. "Yes, sir, I know. I'm sorry. I think El just... she just wanted to talk about today."

"That so? I didn't see a whole lot of talking." Mike grumbled at the comment, that was because he'd been there for all of two seconds! He didn't understand anything and he didn't even try. He knew Hopper really cared about El and her safety, but Mike was done with the dirty looks and the regular "hands off" comments. It's not like Hopper owned El, he wasn't even her real dad! And Mike would never hurt her, not in a million years. He was the one that found her first, a few years ago in the woods. He *saved* her. Nobody understood her the way that he did and nobody cared about her the way that he did either. She would always be safe around him. Besides they were both *fourteen* now, fourteen-year-olds could kiss, right? They were in *high school*.

But that was exactly the thing. Hopper knew what he was like at fourteen and he knew what it was like in that high school. There were certain social traps, certain temptations that he didn't want his impressionable daughter or her pubescent boyfriend falling into. He knew that Mike was a good kid and he didn't want to keep them apart anymore. Whatever they had, it wasn't puppy love. But when

he came back and saw them a few degrees shy of making out on the back deck, it concerned him. Hopper just wanted to protect them, both of them. Maybe he was going about it the wrong way, but, well... he was still learning to be a dad again and teenagers were uncharted territory.

"Well, we *were* talking," Mike argued. "She's been asked to try out for softball and she seems up for it... you'll be happy to know she didn't make anyone wet themselves today either, not even in English!" He cracked a smile, hoping to distract the police chief from their conversation. It didn't work amazingly, but Hopper didn't seem to have anything else to say.

"Alright, well. Don't let it happen again." With that, he pushed open the door and let Mike go inside. He followed, just catching El as she dashed to the kitchen table, making a huge show of pulling her new textbooks out of her bag. Hopper sighed and shook his head, letting Mike go sit next to her as he turned his attention to Steve. "Well?" he asked. "You want to explain why my girl was kissing that boy on the deck while you're in here racking up my electric bill?"

Steve's eyes flew frantically around the room, to the teenagers and then back to his boss. Of course that's what they'd been doing. He hadn't been able to catch a break since he took up being this girl's personal babysitter. At least Dustin listened to him about romance but for someone that hardly had any life skills, El sure was a know-it-all. He had made the decision a few months prior to show them he was a good guy instead of trying to enforce more rules; the kids didn't need another overprotective adult in their lives, but he had warned El countless times about getting caught. Steve had thought he made it pretty clear to El that parents didn't like their kids growing up and that included having romantic relationships with boys. Obviously, he hadn't made it clear enough. He'd known this was a bad idea. "It was her," he blurted out, pointing his index finger at El. "She tricked me with *that* look."

El's curly head jerked up and she narrowed her eyes at accusation. "It's not hard," she taunted. When Hopper wasn't looking Steve stuck his tongue out at her. The older man sighed, closing his eyes for a moment and massaging his temples.

"Let me get this straight. All she has to do is bat her eyelashes and she gets whatever she wants? You let her walk all over you, I mean damn, Steve. And you," he turned to El, "need to stop pushing it." El pouted, holding his gaze for a moment before returning to her homework. Hopper turned back to Steve, putting his hand on his shoulder to lead him to the other side of the long living room.

"He can come over, I just want them supervised," he said in a hushed tone. "If you don't think you can do that then we're going to have a problem."

"No, no, I can. She's just a kid," Steve said, trying to save it. "She's just so... clever. She knows exactly what she's doing." His eyes drifted to the girl engrossed by her homework at the table. "How do you do it?"

Hopper sighed again and shook his head, glancing at El. "You have to show her that her tricks don't work on you," he said. "The next time she tries the big, sad eyes you don't give in. It won't fix the problem forever but it'll slow her down." Everyone else wanted to baby her because of all she'd been through, but Hopper had always had a different approach. All of it came from a place of love, though. Everything he did, every last word. Jim Hopper loved that little girl so much sometimes it scared him. Even though he was hard on Steve, he was fond of him too. He knew that Eleven was hard to handle and really, Hop couldn't imagine anyone doing any better.

Steve nodded and crossed the room again, reaching for his police hat that hung on the coat rack by the front door. "Gotcha. You can trust me Chief. It won't happen again." Hopper nodded and pat him on the back.

"Alright. Well, you're free to go. Thanks for your help today."

"Yeah, yeah, no problem..." Steve's voice quieted as he glanced over at the teenagers at the table. "I best get going, then," he announced glumly.

Mike noticed the older boy's voice drop and looked up from his homework. It was easy to tell when something was up with Steve; he acted *just* like Dustin when he was upset. Whenever Dustin would become unsettled his voice would suddenly drop like he'd suddenly

aged ten years. Steve was exactly the same. Mike watched as Steve's eyes found El again, who hadn't reacted to his farewell.

Steve sighed again. "Okay, then. See ya, Chief. Mike." He nodded towards the boy and opened the front door, darting out and letting it slam behind him. El finally looked up at the loud sound, furrowing her eyebrows together. What was that? Was Steve mad, just because she'd kissed Mike? Why did everyone have to make such a big deal about that?

As always, Mike knew how to explain the strange behavior of others. "I think he was hoping you'd say goodbye to him," Mike said, his eyes on the now closed door. "Remember how you felt when Nancy couldn't tutor you on the Solar System because Jonathan got her tickets to that concert out of town, and you were really looking forward to it?" At the connection, El's eyes widened in horror. She had been sad that weekend. Sad because she loved spending time with Nancy and it had seemed like being with Jonathan was more important to her. She hadn't meant to make Steve feel that way by bringing Mike over.

"But I didn't... I didn't mean-" She cut herself off and looked towards the door, realizing that she was about to apologize to the wrong person. Without another word she jumped up from her seat and swung the door open with her mind, dashing through it. "Steve!" she called as she ran out the door.

He'd left so fast that he'd already started the car engine, but she fixed that by mentally turning the key in the ignition and shutting it off. "Steve!" She reached his car and pulled open the driver's seat door. "I'm sorry," she said, wiping away a small amount of blood from her nose. "I didn't mean to...make you upset. By inviting Mike." She dragged him out of the car so that she could talk to him better. "He had a bad night and I wanted to help and... I didn't mean to make you feel bad too. Promise." Her brown eyes searched his face for a reaction. She didn't want him to leave feeling the way she'd felt that weekend.

"Are you done?" Steve chuckled, putting a hand on her shoulder. It appeared she was and he let out a sigh, running his hand through his hair. "I'm not upset you wanted to bring over your nerdy boyfriend,

alright? Just stop getting me into shit with Hop. He's not only your dad, he's my boss, so keep the PDA to a minimum around here... got it?"

"Got it," El murmured absentmindedly. She didn't know what PDA meant, but she was too stuck on another word to worry about it. "He's not... not my boyfriend," she mumbled.

"Yeah, right. Honestly, El, don't worry about it. You're still my favorite," he smiled at her before widening his eyes at an after thought. "Don't tell Dustin I said that," the girl giggled, Steve joining in a moment later. "Come on then, spill... how was your first day?"

"Good. I'm going to try out for baseba- softball," El told him, correcting herself quickly. "Will you help me practice?" He'd tried to teach her how to play baseball last spring and they both had enjoyed it. Maybe that was how she could make it up to him?

It was an early Tuesday evening in March, the sun was low and the sky was a burnt, bright orange. In a clearing nearby Hopper's hidden cabin, Steve and El stood facing each other with some distance in between them. El had a baseball glove on her left hand whilst Steve was stood in a batting stance, bat in his. No nails this time.

"Right El... just as I showed you, yeah?" Steve grinned. Eleven returned the gesture and gave him a small nod. "Remember, no powers!" he shouted as the ball left her hand. It connected with his bat with a loud crack and disappeared into the overgrowth that surrounded them.

"He's only gone and done it again!" Steve began to cheer as he ran towards El. "Steve-home-run-Harrington!" As soon as he reached her, he grabbed both of her hands.

"No," El protested, knowing what he was about to do. "No!" She smiled through her protesting, but Steve didn't listen. He began spinning, tugging El in a circle at first but then he began to speed up, the momentum sending El flying off the ground. The thirteen-year-old couldn't help but laugh, shrieking as he moved faster and faster.

All too soon, Steve had to stop to prevent them both from falling over.

They both swayed from side to side for a few seconds, giggling and regaining their balance.

Steve pointed in the direction that he had hit the ball. "I'm pretty sure it went that way, help a guy out would ya?" He finished his sentence by giving El a small shove with his elbow.

Her vocabulary may be limited but if looks could kill... El had the death glare down to a tee. "Remember, no powers," she mimicked, crossing her arms over her chest.

Steve returned her glare, stuck out his tongue and blew a raspberry at her. He turned around and started walking with the intent of retrieving the ball, only to be smacked in the face with it as it magically hurtled in his direction.

Steve lit up at the mention of softball. "Softball? El, are you kidding? That's great!" He reached towards her and El backed up, a knowing smile coming across her face.

"No," she said as he leaned forward to pick her up. "No, no...no!" Despite her objections she couldn't help but laugh when he did it anyways. The older boy bent down to lift her up as if she was a championship trophy, spinning her around. For someone who ate so many frozen waffles, she wasn't very heavy.

"Of course I'll help," he said, placing her back on the ground. "When are tryouts?"

"Next week." If he was this happy about it, El had to do it. She wanted to make him proud of her.

"Perfect. Plenty of time to practice. We'll get you whipped into shape in no time, yeah?" He nudged her playfully.

"Yeah," El agreed with a giggle.

"Alright. Well why don't you go make sure Hop hasn't killed Mike yet and I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" El smiled at him as he hopped into his red BMW.

"Okay."

Inhale... exhale...

The air rushes in and out of his flared nostrils.

Inhale... exhale...

His eyelids flutter until they are partially closed over his green eyes.

Inhale... exhale...

As the air enters and leaves his body, his muscles start to grow lighter. His body feels weightless, floating through empty space.

Inhale... exhale...

Tempted to follow the different thoughts arising in his mind, the young boy resists, remaining focused exclusively on the sensation of his breath. Sat upright and crossed legged in the middle of a white-walled room, he remains still. The only noticeable movement is that of his chest slowly rising and falling.

Suddenly, a loud gasp is forced from his lungs and his eyes ping open, sending him flying forward onto all fours. Slowly his head rises and his pupils start to dilate. The piercing green of his irises begins to disappear and his eyes are gradually overcome by huge, black pupils. A three-digit number flashes before his eyes, the face of a girl with curly brown hair.

"Eleven..." he breathes as two large, burly men hurry through the door. Dressed in all white, they both link their arms with his and drag him from the room. The boy glances down at the number inked into his own skin, a number barely different from the one he'd just seen. 010.

Hey guys, just wanted to thank you all again for reading/following/favoriting and reviewing! We so appreciate you! I don't know about you, but I'm ready to start tearing these nice little relationships apart...mwahahaha. I hope you guys are

excited because I am so pumped to keep writing! I'll see y'all in two chapters, you're up Alice! :)

-Ava